A NOTE ON THE SINDHI ALPHABET

HUGH DOW

Sir Hugh Dow entered the Indian Civil Service in 1909 and served in various senior administrative and advisory capacities in pre-war India. From 1939 to 1941 he was Director-General of Supply and President of the War Supply Board, India, and from 1941 to 1946 Governor of Sind. He became Governor of Bihar in 1946. After leaving India he was Consul-General, Jerusalem, and then Chairman of the Royal Commission on East Africa.

IT IS BY no means universally known that Sind owes its alphabet and its whole written language to its British administrators. When Sir Charles Napier conquered Sind, although the country had a well-defined language of its own, that language had no written script which had gained general recognition, and public business was carried on by Hindu scribes who wrote a mongrel Persian in the Persian character. The so-called "Abul Hassan Sindhi", which was being taught by mullas in the mosques at the time of the British conquest, was no more than an attempt to write colloquial Sindhi in ordinary script, and the same may be said of Wathen's *Grammar of Sindhi* in Arabic script, which was written in 1836 for the use of political officers at the court of the Amirs of Sind. The Hindu traders too had adopted for the purposes of their accounts a form of Devanagiri script.

When Sir Bartle Frere took charge of the Province eight years after the conquest, he found only two British officers who could speak Sindhi, and none of their clerks who could write it. Orders were at once issued requiring civil officers to pass a test in the colloquial language, but before any use could be made of Sindhi in official correspondence it was necessary to devise an alphabet in which it could be written. The only two officers whose knowledge of the language gave them any right to an opinion on this subject were Captain (afterwards Sir Richard) Burton and Captain Stack. Unfortunately, these two officers held very divergent views, Burton advocating an adaptation of the Arabic alphabet, and Stack wishing to adapt a modification of the Hindu script already in use, for their limited interests, among the traders of the province. Even in those days the racial aspect of the question caused Frere to hesitate: he feared that the Hindus would refuse to learn the one, while the Muslims would scorn to use the other. In 1853, however, his hesitations were resolved by the Court of Directors of the East India Company, who decided in favour of an Arabic script. Mr (afterward Sir Barrow) Ellis, who was then Collector of Hyderabad, was given the task of devising an alphabet, and the present Sindhi alphabet is the result. With the adventitious aid of a liberal supply of dots, both above and below, the 29 letters of the Arabic alphabet were expanded into the Sindhi alphabet of 52 letters, all of which were considered necessary if due recognition were to be given to the fine shades of guttural and dental articulation in which colloquial Sindhi excelled.

The new script made rapid headway, and with its aid Sindhi was made the official language of the Province, and Persian disappeared from the records. Its supremacy would have been even more rapidly established but for what can now be seen to have been an ill-advised attempt to establish, side by side with the Sindhi alphabet, a new Hindu script for the use of Hindus. The moving spirit in this mistaken movement was Mr Narayan Jaganath Mehta, a Deccani Brahmin gentleman whom the Bombay government appointed to be Deputy Educational Inspector in Sind.

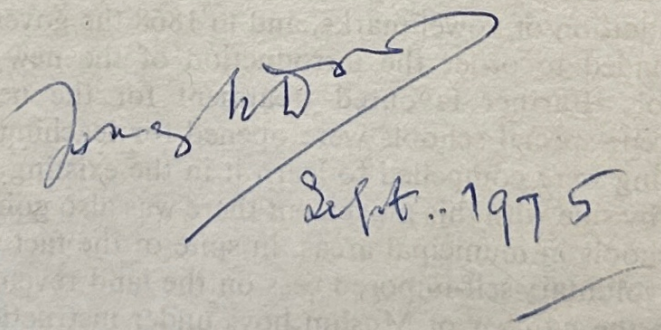
It should here be explained that there was until 1872, and again from 1876 to 1887, no full-time Educational Inspector in Sind. The duties of this post were imposed, as an additional charge, on some European officer who was suspected – sometimes, as the event showed, quite wrongly – of having a particular flair for the subject. The result was that Mr Narayan, who remained in Sind for a quarter of a century, was able, owing to the preoccupation of his nominal superiors with their other duties, to exercise a good deal more influence over educational policy than his position warranted. He was able to persist in his experiments with the Hindu rural alphabets, which he standardized and improved by the addition of vowel marks, and in 1868 the government of Bombay was persuaded to order the introduction of the new Sindhi script into the schools. Further favoured treatment for the new alphabet was soon secured: special schools were opened for teaching it, and teachers under training were compelled to learn it in the existing Arabic–Sindhi schools. Side by side with this movement there was also going on the concentration of schools in municipal areas, in spite of the fact that they were paid for by a voluntary self-imposed cess on the land revenue: the result was that, while the number of Muslim boys under instruction was doubled during the decade between 1860 and 1870, the number of Hindu boys in schools increased fivefold.

In spite, however, of the determined advocacy of Mr Narayan and the diversion of funds from the local cess, the popularization of the Hindu–Sindhi script proved a hopeless task, and in 1881 Mr Dayaram Gidumal, himself a Sindhi Amil, and as an assistant collector in Sind then at the beginning of his brilliant career, definitely recommended its abolition. He pointed out that even the mercantile classes disowned the new script, and the little banya schoolboys only learnt it in order to forget it as soon as they left school, when they went back to their old vowel-less shorthand. Then, as now, what the Hindu shopkeeper wanted for his accounts was a set of esoteric symbols which only he could interpret, and he had little interest in a form of writing that everyone could understand. Mr Dayaram Gidumal's views were endorsed by the Commissioner, Mr Giles, official support was withdrawn and the script soon died a natural death when it ceased to be pushed by government agency.

The main result of this unfortunate experiment was the legacy of resentment with which more discerning Muslims realized how easily a foreign government could be misled by sectarian propaganda masquerading in the garb of educational enthusiasm. The attempt to replace Arabic–Sindhi by any form of Hindu script is now a forlorn hope, but even in quite recent times there could be found people in Sind to whom

any sign of the predominance of Muslim culture was anathema and who were willing to back this forlorn hope. At the turn of this century a new attack was made on the current Sindhi script, in which it was alleged there were at least nine superfluous letters which ought to be eliminated. This was followed up by the assertion that the original pure Sindhi had been "defaced" by the introduction of words of Arabic or Persian origin: it therefore behoved the educational reformer who wished to bring Sindhi to its "original beautiful form" to abolish all the words of Arabic or Persian origin which had enriched the language, to alter such terminations and inflexions as had the same hateful origin, and to remove the superfluous nine letters.

Since the creation of Pakistan, most Hindus have left Sind and there has been a vast influx of Muslims from other Provinces who do not know Sindhi and see no reason why they should learn it. Indeed, there may be some danger that Sindhi may go the way that Erse, Gaelic and Welsh went, and may have to wait, as these languages have done, for enthusiastic and patriotic scholars who will try to restore again the former language of Sind.



This is an "off-print" of our article which was printed in the February 1976 issue of "Asian Affairs". It may be of interest to you. Actually the material for this was collected when I was a junior I.C.S. officer in ~~the~~ about 1918/20 when I was a junior I.C.S. officer in Karachi, but I did not write it up intelligently recently.

The India Office Library and the Society of Antiquaries have copies of this note, of which the original manuscript from which the information was gathered have probably been destroyed.

I have other copies of this, and if you are sufficiently interested to wish to keep it, I do not want it back. Only the ultimate short paragraph is a recent addition, for obvious reasons

Yours sincerely

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Lt Col John Lawrence